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ABSTRACT

A study examined how African American women construct meaning in the television show "Beverly Hills 90210." The analysis was to examine how women of color decode and negotiate one of the most popular youth-oriented Eurocentric television shows--one in which none of the regular cast members are of African-American descent. Methodology was largely ethnographic. It consisted of observing five black college women watching the show in a residence hall on the Ohio State University campus, and then of in-depth interviewing of the same five women. Results showed that the women read the television show in a way directly opposed to that of the reading preferred by the dominant ideology. Although they do not see themselves represented in the show, there is still an identity that is important to them to know about since everyone else watches the show. The oppositional reading allows these viewers to have a bird's eye view of the fantasy that the women on the show live through, while still appreciating their own strengths as strong African-American women. They do not watch the show to confirm their identities; they watch it as entertainment and as members of a residence hall. Therefore, they are less likely to buy into everything that is presented to them in every scene. They can separate the fantasy from the "real" life experiences that they go through everyday. What it means to an African-American woman to watch 90210 is essentially the same thing it means to live their own real lives as a minority in a white society. (TB)

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ED 380 834

LIKE INVISIBLE BLACK DOTS JUST VISIBLE ENOUGH FOR US TO BE INVISIBLE: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S INTERPRETATION OF 90210

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> I can't remember ever seeing any Blacks on the show. Were there once Black characters? You do see them on the screen every once and awhile, but they're really not supposed to be noticed. You know we see them because were Black, but the average white valley girl won't even notice them. I guess they're like invisible black dots just visible enough for us (L27-13).

With the choices of television shows presently offered at this time, one could ask what attracts any group to a particular show. This study explores African American women's experiences of the television show Beverly Hills, 90210. The show focuses on the adjustment problems of the Walsh family - who have moved to Beverly Hills from Minneapolis. 90210 revolves around the lives of eight teenagers seven of whom live in Beverly Hills and one from a nearby suburb. Brenda and Brandon Walsh are the two main characters who manage to deal with, in a low-keyed way, with big issues that actually confront America's teenagers: AIDS, date rape, addiction, divorce, homosexuality, teenage pregnancy and race to name a few. To describe this show as a common experience would mildly limit its culture since Beverly Hills is an exclusive zip code. The experiences of

the show does capture the ethnic breakdown of this area as almost exclusively European American.

In this study, I hope to reveal how African American women construct meaning in the television show 90210. My aim is to examine how these women create and negotiate meaning from a television show that does not have any regular cast members of African descent. This analysis will first identify how women of color decode and negotiate one of the most popular youth-oriented Eurocentric television shows. Second, it will show how these African American women connect with a program that virtually ignores their existence.

A study such as this is imperative in understanding what attracts African American women to a particular show even when they might not identify with any of the characters as a result of no personal identity towards women of color. When there are so few African American role models to choose from on television, what are some of the themes African American women are attracted to when watching a show like 90210. How are issues of race, class and gender engaged by African American women who watch this show?

Recent studies have shown the inadequacy of additive models such as treating European women solely in terms of

gender, while women of color are thought to be doubly subordinated by the cumulative effects of gender and race (Kray, 1993; & Liebes, 1988). A number of studies that have examined the television uses and preferences among African American audiences (Allen & Bielby, 1979) have generally found that African Americans watch more television and prefer shows that did not specifically speak to their experiences. Very little has been done, however, to explain motivations for television use among African Americans women. The next section will include an overview of my research methodology. One of the last sections will focus on a discussion of the African American women's own behavior when it comes to their viewing preferences.

Approach

Although several methods were used to create a holistic vantage for this research project, ethnography was the most direct approach in grounding an understanding of what I was interested in focusing on. Erni (1987) refers to self-reflexivity as a way to locate the ethnographer as a historical being whose vantage point arises from more or less similar social and material conditions that structure the everyday worlds of experience of those they study.

Radway (1988) introduced the approach of collaborative

ethnography that has value in the perspective that I stress in this paper. Collaborative ethnography implies multiple authorship, expressed by people in their everyday material existence. Whenever possible, I allow the African American women who this research is dependent upon to speak in their own voice.

The first names of the African American women interviewed will be used throughout the paper. With their permission I found it imperative to not only give voice to the co-researchers, but to let their voice be known through their unique names, therefore, Keisha, Jennifer, Katrina, Monique, and LaShawna will be used.

The first part of this research included gathering information by observing students watching 90210 in several residence halls on the campus of Ohio University. The main purpose for the early visits was to find a site where both African American and European American students regularly watched 90210. I then engaged in watching the show with the co-researchers drawing insight as a participant observer regarding the conversation both during and after the show. At this time I was able to speak to both the African American women as well as the European American women.

A convenience sample was used for this study. The

primary focus was on five African American women who are students at Ohio University and included a series of participant observations and in-depth interviews. Since all of these women live in the same residence hall and watch the show in a group lounge, the first observation took place there. I did not interact with the women, but simply observed their behavior as they watched the show with the other students. I paid close attention to how these women interacted with others in the lounge since there was both African American and European American women.

By close attention, I mean that the interaction between the women, specifically the comments made regarding the show. Another concern I had was how they interacted with the other students in the lounge. I wondered whether the comments directed towards things on the show were things that they could identify with, or were they reactionary comments regarding their ability to believe what was taking place.

The observations in the lounge presented an environment that might offer some insight to the research. Although no one there, with the exception of the five women, knew who I was, I had the opportunity to observe other students behavior and reactions to the show. This information may

only serve as descriptive dialogue, but it was valuable when I placed it in the context of what the women express about their viewing behavior, especially the differences between the African American women in the lounge as opposed to the viewing which took place in my home.

Description of the lounge

Upon arriving at Adkinson Hall the first of my residence hall visits, I realized that this part of the data collection was going to be more challenging than I had originally anticipated. I was told to arrive before 8:00pm, which I had, because the doors will be locked after that time. To my surprise, I had to wait out in the cold until someone walked through the lobby area. Once in, I slowly worked my way up the stairs checking each modular lounge on every floor. The biggest hassle was having to knock at every door since you need a key to get anywhere in this building. Several students asked me if I needed help finding someone, but I slowly confused them as I began to explain what I was looking for. Not too many students would not be surprised by a question concerning whether or not the lounge they were sitting in had a mixture of both African American and European American students.

Once I found the lounge that would best meet my needs,

I sat down and waited for the residents to start filing in. The lounge which required a key to enter was located on the third floor on side B. There are three halls that lead to the modular lounge. In each mod, there are four private rooms and one bathroom, therefore twelve students live in this particular mod.

There were two women in the lounge when I arrived, but there were several doors open down the halls where I could see students studying, talking on the phone, and listening to music. On the walls of the lounge, there were several posters and flyers regarding upcoming programs on campus. The pattern in the carpet was a busy blue and cream which made me feel tense. The walls were a soothing creme which tended to subdue the bright color of the carpet and upholstery on the chairs.

The television was located on the far left wall, and the chairs were set up around the TV in a format which allowed for the maximum viewing for all the residents. One by one, the students started to arrive strategically sitting in their set spaces. Two women extended their phones as far as they could so they could hear their phones ring. There were eight women who sat down to watch the show, and all but one brought food to the lounge. There were six European

American women and two African American women. The conversation prior to the start of the show focused on the fat content of the food they were eating. The term fat came up thirteen times during the short conversation.

When 90210 came on, the room became silent and the only comments made were during the commercials. The European American women were freely exchanging their comments amongst each other, sometimes giggling incessantly to the comments. There were several comments regarding whether or not any of the women might have reacted in the same way as the women on the show. All of the interaction that took place during the show was between the European American women. The two African American women only watched the show, but did not participate in the conversations during the commercials. These two African American women were visually present, but invisible to the discussion.

The next series of observations took place at my house where the African American women were able to speak freely without the presence of other students. I had originally intended to audio-tape this observation, but then decided not to after I realized the women might be more relaxed without the presence of the recorder. What was most surprising at this viewing of the show was the fact that all

five of the African American women were participating in the critique of the show and they did not wait until the commercials to voice their opinions about what they were seeing. The discussion was dynamic and entertaining as these women commented on the episode and how unbelievable some of the situations were. Several times the women would say "I would never do that," or "white girls are crazy!"

Brummett & Duncan (1992) illustrate that social practices are governed by rules that name acceptable patterns of interaction, of when and where to speak or not, what to wear, where to stand and how to move, when to be alone and when to socialize. The African American women followed this pattern of social practices while watching the show with their European American women friends in the residence hall. When asked about the amount of interaction going on at the private viewing, LaShawna said, "I have never watched a television show with my family and friends without talking about what was going on in the show, but the women in the residence halls would not understand." Monique agreed by saying. "I don't want to call it a Black 'thang' but that's exactly what it is." The African American women adhere to the social practices while in the presence of other people, but do not feel constricted by it. Once again

the concept of double consciousness explains the shift between one's behavior as a result of being aware of how the dominant culture views the behavior of African Americans.

During the private viewing of the show, I asked the women several questions which they could brainstorm about at the end of the show. These questions and comments did not have any formal format since I preferred to have the women just describe what they liked or disliked about the show.

The next step in the research gathering stage was the five individual interviews in which I utilized the interview guide approach.

Topical Protocol

I. Television

1. How did you begin watching this show?
2. How do you identify with the characters on the show?
3. How does the show speak to your experiences as an African American woman?
4. Describe an episode that best represents your experiences.
5. Describe parts that you could not relate to.

II. Viewing behavior

1. Describe the types of shows you watch.
2. Describe a situation where you discussed what went

on after a show with your friends.

3. How does this show interest you?

4. Describe what makes this show popular to you.

III. Viewing behavior others

1. Do you have African American friends who watch the show?

2. What attracts people to this show?

Television

In the first section of the interview, I began by getting some basic definitions about how the women view television. Whether entertainment or information might lead to some insight as to what purpose a specific show has for the individual. Questions surrounding whether the women feel that the show is directed or targeted to a specific audience were also addressed in relation to themselves, as well as others.

The first theme that emerged from the interviews focused on how the women all came to watch the show as a result of encouragement from others (usually European American) women.

> Keisha: "I've been watching for awhile, and I started watching because my cousin and her friends watched it"(K1-14).
>
> Jennifer: "My roommate would be out there watching it, but I never was interested until she started to ask me

each week if I was interested in watching the show with all of her friends"(J5-34).

Katrina: "I started watching and I guess being in class you hear women saying 'did you watch 90210?' And I guess I thought maybe I should see what all the hype is all about"(KT10-18).

Monique: "I guess I was in high school and my friend asked me several times why I never watched the show. I think she thought I didn't like watching things about a bunch of white people. Since she was white, I guess I was tempted to see what she was talking about"(M18-15).

LaShawna: "As the only Black RA on the West green, I was always asked by the white women why I didn't watch the show. They were all asking me one day, so I decided to stay and watch the show"(L25-19).

The African American women did not begin to watch the show as a result of their own interest, but decided to watch as other women pointed out their own involvement with the show. These women knew that this show was not directed towards them prior to watching it, but somehow through the encouragement from others they were influenced that there might be some redeeming qualities for the show. Two of the women stated that 90210 was just a form of entertainment for them.

Jennifer states,

"It's a form of entertainment. As long as it grabs me, you know, I find some interest in it. I also think it's so unbelievable that I'm also attracted to the fantasy of spoiled kids" (J9-4).

LaShawna feels that the show is worth watching just as a

form of entertainment. LaShawna states,

> "When I watch it, I generally find it entertaining as far as a night show goes" (L25-41).

Michelle Wallace in Invisibility Blues summarizes examples of how African American culture has been shaped and signified to meet the standards of White culture. Citing specific areas of concern, she deconstructs the invisible aspects of Black culture to identify them visibly. Wallace states,

> "In terms of television and a show like the Cosby Show, for example, is that Blacks are shown as characters who possess 'positive' attributes of white culture, which are really the attributes of a hypothetical and impracticable absence (or commodification) of culture. 'Culture is then reduced to a style of consumption that offers up, say, expensive, exotic-looking handknit sweaters, or a brief scene of the Cosbys at a jazz club where a Black woman is singing, rather than any concrete or complex textualization of cultural difference. Indeed the show seems to suggest, in its occasional use of Asians and Latinos as well as Blacks, that no one is ultimately different, since culture is something you can buy at Bloomingdales, a kind of wardrobe or a form of entertainment" (p. 2).

Wallace speaks to the issue of how Blacks are represented on television as though there is absolutely no difference between them and the dominant European American culture. The African American women identified several instances where they recognized characters in the scene who were placed as to multiculturalize the show. Therefore, the next theme which emerges is the presence of African Americans on

90210. Keisha identifies how she views African Americans on the show by stating,

> "It's nothing like I would say, it's like me watching a soap opera with no major Black characters. The only one's you see are either someone's maid or the busboy in the restaurant where all the white people go!"(K3-43).

Jennifer rationalizes that she is not disturbed by the fact that there are no roles for African American actors on the show. She feels that since she does not expect to see African Americans she should not be surprised when she does not. Jennifer states,

> "Well, it really doesn't bother me because I really don't analyze it and such unless I'm talking right now when I really have to think about it. But I find that the reason I may not analyze it is because there is a predominately white cast and I'm not sure that is the way it is the way some white cast may treat it, especially one's with money where the problem can be easily covered up or you know"(J7-27).

Katrina on the other hand tries not to offer excuses as to the reasons regarding the lack of African American presence. Her understanding of the issues presented is that they attempt to discuss everything, but since they do not have a strong sense of African American identity, it is hard to expect that the show would recognize those issues from an African American perspective. Katrina states,

> "I don't think the issues...well, okay, some of the issues they address in the show, they try to address, I think are universal issues you know,

> exactly, teen pregnancy, girl abuse, you have friendship, rivalries, you have all that stuff. That is sort of universal, I don't think it very cross cultural, it crosses cultures, but I don't think an African American woman, I would find myself relating to much except for maybe the backbiting that goes on between friends. They don't address African American issues, except for the episode there was an African American basketball player, this is in the college years, and you know, he was on scholarship, and Brandon was tutoring him or something like that"(KT11-41).

LaShawna is frank in her evaluation of how she sees African Americans represented on the show. She does not seek excuses from the show regarding the dominant culture, and she expresses how she experiences the African American presence as an absence that only Blacks can see. DuBois refers to this understanding as a "double consciousness" that Blacks have. The dominant culture only has to view themselves through themselves, whereas African Americans are constantly in a state of viewing themselves based on how others view them. In other words, African Americans are working twice as hard to develop an understanding of themselves because they are always having to act between their own sense of themselves as well as the dominant cultures sense of who they are. LaShawna states,

> "I can't remember ever seeing any Blacks on the show. Were there once Black characters? You do see them on the screen every once and awhile, but there really not supposed to be noticed. You know we see them because were Black, but the average white girl won't even notice them. I guess they're like invisible

black dots just visible enough for us"(L27-13).

Intertextuality

"The theory of intertextuality proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it. These relationships do not take the form of specific allusions from one text to another and there is no need for readers to be familiar with specific or the same texts to read intertextually. Intertextuality exists rather in the space between texts" (Fiske, 1987).

The African American women realized that there are very few shows on television that actually speak to their experiences. The fact that they as a group were not motivated to watch 90210 when it first came on is one example of how these women intertextually read and understood this show. They understood based on prior knowledge of television how these types of shows operate. There was no mystery with what 90210 was all about. Keisha best articulates this fact as she explains what 90210 is missing.

> "90210 is no different from all the other shows that are on television. The only difference is that more white kids like this one. there is nothing on the show that speaks to me, and I knew that before I started to watch the show. I knew that they wouldn't put a Black family on the show,

> well, if they did, the Black family would not be one of the main characters...It seems as though they always have to experiment after a show becomes popular. It's as if they say to themselves, 'so now since we have a hit on our hands let's add some color.' I don't buy any of it. It's all the same stuff to me." (KI5-30).

Viewing Behavior of Others

The last section focused on how the women perceive others viewing behavior. This section basically had more of a reflection for the women. Since they had already discussed their personal reactions, this section gave them the flexibility to rethink how they answered their own questions. Fiske, like Hall, understands that television programming represents the dominant class's attempt to homogenize the diversity of meanings that are created by the television audience (Fiske, 1987). The responses from this section articulated a concern for the types of experiences that the co-researchers have compared to the issues that are illustrated on the show. The responses are presented in full quotations.

> Keisha: "For white kids, they must have it really easy. I mean not once have I seen them studying and they're supposed to be in college. I mean rarely do I see them hitting the books or even flunking a test. They never have to worry about who's paying for their tuition. I think of these things everyday. For once, I would like to see them complain about the same things I complain about"(K4-45).

Jennifer: "I find that although they do hit upon some controversial topics, some that are you know, here and now like the incident with David being on drugs. I feel like they treat it like they just hit upon it, they don't go into depth as to what the real problem is, I mean I've had a family member that's been on drugs and it's nothing like you know a pat on the back or okay, we'll get through this. Like let's all move back in together. It's a long process and it's a long journey back, you know it's not just one week, I'm going to pop pills and next week I'm going to stop. You know or smoke or whatever the problem is"(J7-7).

Katrina: "I thought it was slightly stereotypical because the athlete was an African American and you know it might be an attempt to bring more African American actors on to the show, but it was a cameo appearance, he was in one and a half episodes and my question is was not really, in retrospect, something like why is the tall basketball player African American, all right, but that's just the way it is on TV. They make it seem like African American actors are only worth playing roles like the athlete with a problem who needs help from the white actor, or the musically talented one who everyone likes. It would have been nice to see a white athlete who needs help from the African American honor student"(KT12-4).

Monique: "I don't watch this show if I feel I need to be confirmed as an African American woman. None of the characters look like me, in fact if they do have those parts for people just to walk in, if they use African American women, they usually have long straight hair, colored contact lenses, and no hips"(M20-29).

LaShawna: "I remember one of my nieces had said once that she thought everyone on TV (Black people) was beautiful. I think she thought this because all of the African American actors look a certain way. They sure don't look like me or my family. I wonder if the little Black kids who watch this show think that themselves? Or worse yet, I wonder if they ever recognize that they are not represented in the show?" (L28-15).

The women realize that they cannot expect to see their

own experiences on the show, but continue to watch knowing that they are not represented. Again the identity of being visible enough to be invisible.

I pursued the second round of interviews from a position not directly associated with the interviewer, that is, I am interested in the information that the co-researchers offer instead of preparing questions for the group. I would like the themes to grow out of their own insights, versus having my perspective alter what they might say. This concern has more to do with the fact that I am not as familiar with the show.

Viewing Behavior

> "A slight difference in opinion, yes, but a reflection of profoundly different worlds. The mother is a modernist; the daughter is entering the world of postmodernism. In the postmodern world there is no individual essence to which one remains true or committed. One's identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships. In the case of "Who am I?" it is a teeming world of provisional possibilities" (Gergen, 1991).

Allen and Bielby (1979) found that Blacks are more frequent viewers of non-prime-time television, but during prime-time, Blacks and Whites view with approximately the same frequency. Among Blacks, younger people were the heaviest viewers of television and during prime-time, upper

income Blacks were heavier viewers than lower income Blacks. For this current study, I did not find this to be true when the show was not oriented towards a Black audience. There was more likelihood that the African American women were not going to watch 90210 as opposed to the European American women. When asked about the preferred shows that the African American women watched, most of the women supported the research. The next theme emerged as I asked the women what types of shows were they more likely to watch on a regular basis. Keisha states,

> "It's not that I don't like 90210, but if I were to have my choice, it would most definitely be Martin and Living Single"(K4-1).

Jennifer made a point to stress that she was only able to watch television on two nights a week, therefore, she chooses to watch her two favorite shows with her African American sisters, and 90210 with her residence hall friends. Jennifer states,

> "My nights are Wednesday's and Sundays, but I really do enjoy Sunday better. I can relate to the problems confronted on a show like Martin or Living Single because they are Black problems and I feel they are more closer to the truth of my experiences. 90210 is fun to watch with the girls in my mod"(J6-41).

Katrina states,

> "Well, I don't like the way Martin makes African

> Americans look like silly baffoons with his antics. I do like to watch Living Single. I can see myself in some of the things that the women go through and they're funny. I see it as a positive image for other Black women"(KT12-17).

Monique states,

> "Well, basically, Martin and Living Single, the whole cast is completely Black and like especially Living Single it's like the issues, I don't know, it is the issues I can see characteristics of each one of the people that are on the show. I see them all as my friends and the roles are all real"(M21-38).

LaShawna states,

> "I like Living Single because they are all pro-Black women. It's about their experiences and so I can feel a real positive message being sent to other African Americans"(L30-13).

The African American women discussed the role of their identity when it came to the shows that featured an African American cast. They found themselves more likely to identify with the storylines.

Identity is a social and historical construction. Identity is formed by political and economic and cultural exigencies. Identity can also be a fiction. Is one's identity a conscious choice? Identity may appear unitary but is always fragmentary. Identity is deciding to acknowledge or not the political, economic and cultural exigencies.

Identity as a social construction exists based on the

value individuals place on what one might think is acceptable to the dominant culture. Do we identify with those phenomenon that have no immediate relation to our own identity, or does our identity of ourselves grow out of our absence in the media, literature, etc... Identity is closely related to identification, whether as an inner process of psychic development or as an act of recognition by a human being towards an object, animate or inanimate. Identity is formed when clear representations of self are available as role models for individuals. Monique feels as though her identity is almost never represented on television and especially on a white campus where she interacts with a majority of white women. Monique states,

> "I think of my face when I'm walking or talking with a white woman, she's like slender, and she has a small nose and then I start comparing myself to that and thinking is that the image of beauty and do other people see me as beauty. And then there are other times when I say to myself, I love my large hips, my wide nose, my dark skin, and I am proud of my black hair, and things like that!" (M20-27).

Monique does not rely on the media to confirm her identity of herself, if she did, she would probably have an unhealthy sense of herself. The question one might ask regarding identity is what happens when the popular media does not present accurate role models for all individuals?

The African American women did not feel as though they

could identify with any of the characters on the show. Monique states,

> "You know, the show doesn't have real life situations. I mean none of the things that take place happen to me and my friends, but then again I'm not white from Beverly Hills" (M21-33).

Keisha could not identify with the characters on the show because she does not think the characters have true to life problems. Keisha states,

> "My first reaction to this show is that these white people are crazy, but then I think about how they don't have to worry about the problems that I have to deal with. You know I can watch the show and not have to think about my problems because this show doesn't deal with major problems" (K3-8).

Stuart Hall (1980) refers to three types of readings a viewer has of a text. The African American women in this study are undoubtedly placed in the oppositional reading category. Their own reading of the text is in direct opposition to the preferred reading to the dominant ideology, but that does not excuse the fact that they as a group continue to buy into the dominant ideology by watching it. What has been illustrated throughout the group interaction is the fact that although they do not see themselves represented in the show, there is still an identity that is important to them to know about since everyone else watches the show. The oppositional reading

allows the viewer to have a birds eye view of the fantasy that these women on the show live through, while still appreciating their own strengths as strong African American women. They do not watch this show to confirm their identities, they watch the show as entertainment and members of a residence hall community. Therefore, they are less likely to buy into everything that is presented to them in every scene. They can separate the fantasy from the "real" life experiences that they go through everyday. LaShawna best articulates her feelings toward watching the show by stating,

> "There are certain shows that I know will make me feel good as a Black woman, and 90210 is not one of them. That's not to say that I don't like watching it, I do. I just realize that I am not going to see images of myself in any of the story lines. So I watch just like everyone else"(L30-14).

Eason (1984) refers to cultural phenomenology as describing what it feels like to live in a world in which there is no consensus about a frame of reference to explain "what it all means" (p. 322). Although I do not attempt to name this project as cultural phenomenology, there are very subtle similarities with how these women view themselves while watching a show which excludes their very existence that would make anyone ask "what it all means." So what

does it mean when African American women cannot expect to see or experience representation of their own lives in a television show that everyone around them watches? It means that once again, the media is no different than the lived experiences that African American women and virtually every other marginalized group faces on a daily basis. It's like being invisible black dots just visible enough in society to be invisible.

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